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SECSTATE FOR AF/PD CANYASO, TAYBAR, LALLISON AND PEHRNMAN; IIP/G/AF  
AMURPHY

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SUBJECT: RELIGION, WOMEN'S ROLE IN MAURITIUS: ROUNDTABLE ON OBAMA'S  
CAIRO SPEECH IS LIVELY

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: At an Embassy roundtable discussion of President Obama's June 4 speech to the Muslim world, secular-leaning reporters participated in a lively and wide-ranging discussion, with many ideas about religion in multi-confessional Mauritius. A subsequent flyer distributed at Mauritian mosques around the island illustrates a much more negative response to the speech. Most Mauritians were very positive about the speech, while most Mauritian Muslims welcomed Obama's new, positive tone but reserved judgment on how much policy change has arrived. END SUMMARY.

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Interfaith Dialogue, Interfaith Partnerships  
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¶2. (SBU) To supplement the extensive media coverage in Mauritius of President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech to the Muslim world, the Charge d'Affaires hosted an press roundtable June 10. Attending the roundtable were reporter Hamish Ramdharry of the leading English language weekly "News on Sunday" and senior reporter Henri Marimootoo from leading French language weekly "Week-end." Among the no-shows, unfortunately, was a Muslim journalist. The CDA kicked off the roundtable discussion by emphasizing that President Obama is proposing a new beginning between the United States and Muslim communities around the world, based on mutual respect and mutual interests. Noting President Obama's comments on interfaith dialogue and interfaith partnerships, the Charge noted that it is important to develop interfaith programs that bring community service elements across cultural/religious groups in Mauritius, where such programs often channel service and help to one's own group only. She pointed out that the Embassy has focused on interfaith grants to organizations in various communities in Mauritius.

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Mauritius a Religious Powder Keg?  
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¶3. (SBU) Ramdharry countered that "charity begins at home," but was eager to discuss how to translate the U.S. example to Mauritius. Religion should be a private matter, he believes. Marimootoo agreed. Mauritians give too big a role to religion, he said, which represents a deterioration since the 1950s and 60s. Mauritius is a "powder keg," he went on, where unity is largely artificial. Religion plays a negative role, and "the last by-election was the worst" from his viewpoint.

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Confronting Religion-Based Extremism  
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¶4. (SBU) Asked whether they believed there is extremism in Mauritius, the reporters said yes, although Ramdharry called it "veiled extremism." His example was recent student council elections where a number of students told him the issues meant nothing to them, they were going to "vote for the Brahmin." Both the Hindu and Muslim communities are vulnerable to extremism, he said.

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Bias Flies Under the Radar  
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¶5. (SBU) Marimootoo saw no community that was immune to the virus of religion and religion-based extremism. If someone says "I am not a communalist" (NOTE: a partisan of his religious community, END NOTE), then he is, according to Marimootoo. Religion-based partisanship is subtle, because it needs no words, and can be based on last names alone. "With my name, I am supposed to be a Tamil, but I am not," he noted. When Mauritian Creoles (largely Catholic) protested against the death of the Creole singer Kaya in police custody, that was not originally about religion, but about class-based police brutality, he said. Then "some wicked people" made it a religious issue.

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Not Religion, but Justice  
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¶6. (SBU) Marimootoo sees Obama's references to Palestine and Israel as dangerous in the context of a dialogue with Muslims because for him the right of the Palestinians to their state is not based on religion, but justice. He wondered why the U.S. has been "taking so long" to back a Palestinian state in reality: "even Bush said he backed it," he noted ironically.

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Religious Mythology, Political Reality  
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¶7. (SBU) Asked if Muslim extremism exists in Mauritius, Marimootoo said the concerns are actually local, and have been twisted into religious concerns. People are encouraged to see Mauritian politics and history along religious lines. There is a mythology about independence that Creoles and Muslims voted against it, while Hindus supported it, but this is not the case, he asserted.

¶8. (SBU) Ramdharry, noting that he is a member of a Hindu social club, said politics in Mauritius is about appeasement of groups. Every religious group is represented in the Cabinet, he said, but if the Prime Minister simply picked the best people for the jobs, "the Cabinet might be all Chinese." The Prime Minister is a hostage to people's feelings, stating one week in public that he deals with no one based on religious identity and the next week, in a closed meeting, promising to ensure that a religious group gets its share of government benefits.

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Women's Rights and Attitudes  
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¶9. (SBU) Nearing the end of the discussion, the Charge noted the President's points on women's rights. She observed that girls are being educated in Mauritius in numbers as high as boys, at least until high school. However, she questioned the lack of representation for women in Parliament, local councils and Ministries (with only two women ministers). Marimootoo blamed women in Mauritius for not learning about politics. "They are passive" except for a few active ones, but those few are heard so often that "they become boring." Ramdharry acknowledged women's rights and said minds have to change in Mauritius.

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A Tract from the Mosque  
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¶10. (SBU) On June 21, Muslim contacts gave an Emboff a copy of a flier, written in French, that had been handed out at local mosques. The flier, purporting to come from "Hizb ut-Tahrir" (translation: "The Party of Liberation") is a hard-line Muslim response to Obama's Cairo speech. Sprinkled with Quranic verses, the flier claims that the President of the United States, "the head of unbelief, whose hands were still stained with the blood of Muslims of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, etc." has not changed the policies of the United States, despite his "disconcerting gentle tone." Those policies, according to the flier, are thoroughly unjust, but in the end "the world will witness the resurgence of the Khalifate and good will prevail in its every corner." Despite the harsh tone and some harsh predictions, there is no call for violence. Rather, there is an affirmation "to Obama and the world" that "Islam can count on its sincere and devout men to reestablish definitively the Islamic State

in this world, not by exploitation or colonization or the pillaging of its resources, but by justice, the elimination of oppression, the reestablishment of the rights of those who have been deprived of them." Some of the Muslim contacts who brought us a copy of the text voiced their outrage at the anti-Obama statements.

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Comment  
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¶11. The reporters who attended the roundtable may not represent the center points here - they are often secular-leaning or not religious at all. The writer of the mosque flyer appears to come from the other end of the spectrum, seeing the world through a specific, religious lens. Mauritius is a notably religious nation on the surface, a place where churches are packed every Sunday, mosques are full every Friday, and temples of several kinds attract numerous devotees. While many question how deep the devotion runs, for the vast majority of these worshippers, religion appears to play a positive role. The dangers pointed out by the two reporters of religion being used as a divisive political force are real enough. At the same time, however, the various kinds of Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists here have been rubbing elbows on this small island for several centuries in relative peace. President Obama's speech brought some key issues to the surface, provoking a lively discussion. The majority of Mauritians seem to have found much to approve in Obama's speech. While a handful saw nothing good in it, the majority of Muslims here seem to have been pleased with the tone but to have reserved judgment on the substance. Even the head of the opposition repeatedly used the Obama speech to note needed changes in Mauritius. Post deems the speech to have had a strong positive overall impact in Mauritius.

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